

Teaching Vocabulary in Colour

By Anna Gnoinska

Many students consider learning vocabulary a tedious job. They try studying lists of words, with their spelling, pronunciation, meaning, synonyms, etc. only to realize a few hours later that their results are hardly satisfactory. They start blaming their poor memories. They say they are discouraged by the number of words in English and their complex usage. They come to rely on incidental learning, finding intentional studying boring and inefficient. Some authors writing about human motivation seem to support such students' opinions (Spaulding 1992). They say that learning words is a task which cannot possibly be intrinsically motivating. Teachers, however, keep looking for ways to substitute rote repetition with more effective techniques and to make learning vocabulary easier and more pleasant. They develop various mnemonic strategies employing action, music, drawing and fantasy. With this idea in mind, I also set out to conduct classroom research looking not so much for scientifically significant data but for practical ways to make classes more lively and help students acquire English vocabulary.

Hues Maketh Man

Colours have a tremendous influence on human health and psyche. Lack or overabundance of certain colours can cause physical or emotional disorders. Exposure to colour vibrations is used in the treatment of a number of diseases and mental problems. The colour of the classroom walls, curtains or even the teacher's clothes can either soothe or irritate students. Colour is also an important tool in visual thinking. It separates ideas so they can be seen more clearly; it stimulates creativity and aids the memory. Colour captures and directs attention. Even conventionally outlined notes can benefit from colour coding; maps, cluster maps, mandalas, and most expressive drawings are considerably more effective in colour (Williams 1983: 107). It is not unimportant, however, which colours we use to stimulate students. To benefit from using them, we should know what possible power they have over our students. Then, we will not expose learners to calming vibrations if we expect them to be active, or to intellectual vibrations if we expect them to use their imagination. According to Muths (1994) and Mertz (1995), the most commonly used colours have the following properties:

Green symbolizes balance and agreement with nature and other people. It soothes the nervous system. It gives hope and peace of mind. It is said to be favoured by quiet, patient, open-minded traditionalists. Too much green, however, evokes sadness and hidden fears.

Blue is a calming and cooling colour. It is relaxing for the eyes and cheering for the mind. It promotes intellectual processes, that is why people who favour it are clever and industrious, but not always creative. They are exceptionally just, dutiful and loyal.

Yellow, when bright and sunny, reinforces the nervous system and helps in analytical studies. It symbolizes wisdom, shrewdness, ambition and intellectualism of the left brain. People who like

yellow are happy optimists, but also critical thinkers, who will eagerly defend their views. They often lack creativity and imagination. Pale shades of yellow, on the other hand, mean unfavourable emotions like envy or a tendency to plotting and intrigue.

Black is the colour of mystery and the unknown. It protects people's individualism and makes them seem more unusual and interesting. People who like black are profound explorers and original thinkers.

Orange symbolizes vitality, good humour and creative fantasy. It inspires and invigorates people who otherwise are apathetic, uninterested or depressed. It is favoured by sociable extroverts and those who need cheering up.

Red is the most exhilarating colour, which stimulates vivid emotions of the right brain. It promotes health, energy and interest. In some people, however, it may evoke aggression.

White stands for youth, cleanliness and nativity. People who like white strive for perfection. They are submissive idealists, whose dreams are difficult to fulfill.

Pink, if not overused, has a calming effect. It is a symbol of daydreaming and optimism. It is favoured by delicate people longing for a feeling of security.

Figure 1 below. Students favourite colours.

It is significant that as many as 24% of all optimists opted for blue, which is a cheering colour, and 25% of pessimists preferred green, which could make them even more sad. Students were also asked how important colours were for them and what colours they favoured in their learning environment. Most of them claimed that they disliked brown, they found dirty-yellow or greenish rooms depressing, and that they considered white chalk and black board formal and uninspiring.

Colourful Handouts

Experimenting with ways to make my classes more interesting and lively, I tried using coloured paper for handouts (students in our college do not have regular handbooks for studying English and learn from materials prepared by their teachers). For the whole year students received handouts in six different colours and could choose the colour they preferred. From the very beginning the reaction was enthusiastic. Some students knew at once which colour they wanted and they were ready to fight tooth and nail with their colleagues to get their favorite color as soon as possible. Other students held a handful of pages for some time, trying to decide what mood they were in and what colour would suit them best that very day. Usually, lively students chose lively handouts, and quiet ones preferred pale, mild shades. If they happened to receive the colour they did not desire, they worked slower and concentrated less than when working with their favourite shades.

Soon, almost all students bought coloured copybooks for their personal notes and commented that it was easier for them to remember words written on colourful pages than on white paper. When asked about their favourite colours for handouts, they gave the answers shown in Figure 2. The results show that students preferred the colours which had a positive influence on their psyche and were pleasant for the eyes. The colours may also have improved their intellectual abilities, although not so much their imagination and creativity. This again illustrates that learning vocabulary is perceived as a task requiring concentration and good memory more than fantasy.

Do colours aid the memory for words?

In order to see if colours could enhance students' memory power, I conducted a short experiment. I asked 58 students to learn 20 English words and their meaning within five minutes. The words were written individually on cards in five colours: blue, green, orange, red, and yellow. All words were connected with business and were most probably new to the students. Subsequently, students were tested on all the words.

The results are shown in Figure 3 below. The results might mean that some colours drew more attention and helped students' concentration better than others. The words printed on blue or red cards were remembered the best while those written on green had the worst results. It is interesting that green, most students' favourite colour, was the worst memory aid. Its relaxing qualities could have had a distracting influence on students.

Using Colour to Teach Vocabulary

It is a well known fact that students recall words better when they read the definitions and draw their own pictures to represent them than when they read and write the words and the definitions. Tracing a picture of the definition produces better recall than writing the definition, and creating one's own visual image is more effective than tracing (Wittrock 1977:171–172).

Using colour in a number of ways produces similar results: students concentrate better, spend more time processing a word, and find learning more interesting and pleasant. Colour is useful in both learning and revising, as well as making students and teachers aware of the way they approach certain tasks. Neuropsychologists, for instance, give students four pens and have them work with each pen in a specific order for a specified period of time (red pen for three minutes, then blue for three minutes, and so on). The results reveal a good deal about how the students did the task, what was done first, second, or third (Williams 1986:107). In teaching vocabulary to more advanced students of English, this technique might show what information they seek first when working with a dictionary: whether they look for definitions, equivalents in their own native tongue, example sentences, synonyms, or other information.

The most popular uses of coloured chalk or pencils are:

1. to practice spelling and pronunciation:

underline or colour difficult letter or sound clusters (e.g., double consonants in accommodation or the sounds in thought); mark stressed syllables in longer words (luxurious); underline words in

a passage that look nice or ugly to you; draw a picture representing a word you cannot remember; decorate the initial or final sounds/letters that cause difficulty;

2. to remember the word's grammar:

underline concrete nouns in one colour and abstract ones in another; mark countable and uncountable nouns in a text with different colours; underline transitive and intransitive verbs; mark words which are masculine, feminine, or neuter in meaning; mark different parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions) with colours;

3. to teach semantic categories and word differences:

underline all words in a text connected with a given topic (e.g., health, food, travelling, etc.) with a coloured pencil; underline all words in a text associated with different ways of speaking (looking, walking, or smiling) in order to notice the differences in their usage; mark adjectives with positive and negative meanings with different colours; underline synonyms or antonyms of certain words; make colourful charts, mandalas, semantic maps, or idea sketches to practise vocabulary;

4. to practise morphology:

colour all prefixes and suffixes in a passage and try to find out what they usually mean; underline the stem of given words to see that they are related (e.g., satisfaction, insatiable, unsatisfactory); use different colours to mark prefixes, stems, and suffixes of words on a list of derivatives (e.g., long, prolong, prolonged, prolongation, longitude, longish, longing, etc.); and

5. to draw students attention to words and to stimulate discussion:

let them express their opinions and preferences in a creative way; underline with different colours words which have happy/sad or nice/ unpleasant associations for you; mark words which are easy or difficult for you to remember or words you would like to remember after the class; colour all attractive/boring or useful/uncommon words in a passage.

Apart from underlining or colouring words or letters, students can also improve their retention by colour coding (associating certain lexical or grammatical categories with particular colours); making coloured drawings or symbols for words or grammatical categories to be used in the classroom on flash cards, cue cards, posters, and overhead transparencies; or using coloured discs to mark some features of words presented in pictures or magazine cut-outs (e.g., gender or countable nouns). Teachers can help students acquire more difficult items of vocabulary by using coloured chalk or by placing pictures or writing words on coloured construction paper. Students, on the other hand, can use colour in their notebooks and for dittos (Allen and Valette 1972:118–119).

Teachers will have their own ideas and will use colour to suit their own students' needs. Whether they introduce colourful flashcards, posters, or notes on the board, they may find them all helpful and enjoyable. The main advantages of using colour in the classroom include the following:

- Colouring words helps to concentrate on the task and extends the time and attention students give to each word to be learnt.

- Underlining words or decorating them with coloured pencils is an activity no student can get wrong, and the feeling of success is extremely encouraging for all students.
- Texts and exercises coloured with pencils look more familiar or personal to students and are much easier to work with than clean texts when revising the material.

Allowing students to make decisions about what is easy/difficult, interesting/ boring, useful/useless for them and what they want/don't want to remember while underlining certain words with coloured pencils makes students feel responsible for their results. In most cases, such a feeling of control makes students aware of the good side of studying and they start working harder.

Finally, using colour in any way makes students and teachers more creative. Developing new ideas, drawing pictures, and playing with words make studying a pleasure rather than a cumbersome duty.

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Figure 1 Students' Favorite Colors				
	Optimists 25 61%	Pessimists 16 39%	Total 41 100%	
Green	5 20%	4 25%	9 22%	
Blue	6 24%	2 12.5%	8 19.5%	
Yellow	5 20%	3 19%	8 19.5%	
Black	4 16%	3 19%	7 17%	
Brown	2 8%	1 6%	7 17%	
Orange		2 12.5%	3 7%	
Red	1 4%	1 6%	2 5%	
White	1 4%		2 5%	
Gray	1 4%		1 2.5%	

Figure 2 Students' Favorite Colours: Handouts and Notebooks				
	Lively Students 45 (64%)	Quiet Students 25 (36%)	Total 70 (100%)	
Yellow	14 (31.1%)	6 (24%)	20 (28.5%)	
Green	10 (22.2%)	5 (20%)	15 (21.5%)	
Blue	6 (13.3%)	6 (24%)	12 (17.1%)	
Pink	7 (15.5%)	4 (16%)	11 (16%)	
White	5 (11.1%)	3 (12%)	8 (11%)	
Orange	3 (3.3%)	1 (4%)	4 (6%)	

Figure 3 Learning Words from Coloured Flashcards		
	WORDS TO LEARN	CORRECT ANSWERS
Blue	salutation, procurer, copywriter, vendor	192 (83%)
Red	turnover, remuneration, shareholder, bill of lading	168 (72%)
Orange	consignment, wholesaler, stocktaking, assets	152 (66%)

Yellow	takeover bid, stencil, widget, gross income	140	(60%)
Green	freight, invoice, specification, overheads	136	(59%)
*58 students gave a total of 232 answers for each colour (58 X 4 words)			

1. Song dictation

The purpose of this activity is to sharpen students' listening ability in the pronunciation of shortened verb forms such as *I'm, I've, It's, I'll*, and the like, as well as the distinction between long and short vowels (/i/ and /I:/) in words like *coming, receive, free, still, ribbon, three, see*, and so on. The song used in the activity is "Tie a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree."

Students are first handed out the lyrics with the words missing. They are asked to go through the lyrics and try to guess the words in the blanks. The teacher then explains difficult words and lets students read the lyrics. This is followed by the teacher asking simple questions to check the students' overall comprehension of the song. Students can listen to the song three times: the first time purely listening and trying to work out what the missing words are; the second time filling in the gaps and the third time checking to confirm whether the answers are correct or not.

The teacher then discusses the answers with the students and practices pronouncing the words with them through further listening and singing with the tape. The next step is to help students understand more about the song by engaging them in creative writing tasks which involve placing them into different roles related to the characters in the song. For example, students may be asked to imagine themselves to be the husband and wife in the song. Half of them will be the husband who will soon be released from prison and come home to reunite with his wife. Each of them is to write a letter to his wife to ask whether she will forgive him or not. The other half will pretend to be the wife who will each write a reply to the husband telling him what she feels.

Another writing activity can be done in groups. Each group will be asked to write a conversation between the husband and wife when they meet again. Students can express freely their ideas in the construction of the dialogue in a low anxiety environment. This will naturally lead to a role-play exercise during which students can further stretch their imagination through exposure to other students' work.

Students may be unable to replicate the whole session as the design for creative writing tasks might be beyond their abilities. They can definitely work on the filling in the gaps task. To minimize the pressure on the task, students may do it in groups. First, they have to choose a song they like for the exercise. Then they decide which language items they want for practice (for example, vocabulary, adjectives, pronouns and so on) and delete appropriate words in the lyrics. At this time, teachers will need to give feedback to students to ensure that what they have prepared suits the purpose before they actually present their work to their classmates. Based on

the students' work, teachers may build up more exercises on creative writing or grammar tasks. Working on their own materials, students find learning more interesting and motivating.

2. Song reading

This activity aims at developing students' ability to comprehend the literal meaning of the song and at the same time analyze the hidden message. It may be more suitable for advanced students and can be done in groups. The song used in the present activity is "Lemon tree".

The teacher first hands out the entire lyrics to the students with a set of comprehension questions. The teacher then plays the song to the students and gives them some time to do the silent reading focusing their attention on the questions which are geared towards the surface understanding of the song. Students may work out the answers in groups in order to generate more conversation in English. The questions used in the activity are:

- 1) Who is talking in the song? (The father)
- 2) To whom is he talking? (The son)
- 3) What is the main subject of the song? (Lemon tree)
- 4) According to the father, what's wrong with the lemon tree? (The tree is pretty and the flower is sweet but the fruit is impossible to eat.)
- 5) Describe the girl the son met. (She was so sweet that when she smiled, the stars rose in the sky.)
- 6) What made the son forget about the father's words about the lemon tree? (The music of her laughter)
- 7) What happened after the girl left? (She took away the sun and left the darkness behind.)
- 8) Why did she leave the man? (She left him for another man.)

Students should have a general understanding of the song after they have completed the comprehension exercise. Teachers then discuss the answers with the students and focus on the development of the story in the song. The theme of the song may be introduced to the students, drawing their attention not only to the surface meaning of the song but also to the message it carries. This can be done by reflecting on the guiding questions below:

- 1) What does the lemon tree refer to? (love/temptation/woman)
- 2) What is the attitude of the father towards love? (never put your faith in love)

3) How is the father comparing love with the lemon tree? (Love is like a lemon tree which is very pretty but the fruit is too sour to eat.)

4) Should the son follow the father's advice? (Yes, this would help him understand more about the nature of love and not be easily cheated.)

There is more follow up work on the creative writing tasks. First, teachers may ask students to imagine themselves to be the son in Lemon Tree and write a story about some possible events in the song. Second, as the son in Lemon Tree, write a letter to his friend to describe his feelings of being deserted by the girlfriend. What advice will the son give to his friend? For the students' session, they may follow the same procedure of reading a song by first comprehending its literal meaning and then analysing its hidden message. However, students may have difficulty in identifying an appropriate song due to their limited exposure to English. In this case, teachers may suggest a song for them to work on. For example, "Windflowers" may be a suitable song for this exercise. Students may construct the comprehension questions to look at the literal meaning of the song while teachers focus on questions that examine the underlying meaning and the creative writing tasks.

3. Split song

This activity provides an opportunity for the students to improve their comprehension ability through approaching a song in an interesting way. It may be done in groups to promote interaction among students. The song "Diary" is used for illustration.

Teachers first identify several stanzas which are suitable for this exercise. This is indeed a matching exercise in which teachers divide each sentence of the stanza into two parts and jumble the order of those on the right. Students are required to restore the stanzas to their original forms. Before doing the exercise, teachers may go through the difficulty vocabulary with students first. Here is the sample of the exercise:

After students have completed the exercise in groups, teachers may let them look at the entire lyrics to check their answers. They may also listen to the songs several times and learn how to sing it. The exercise may lead to more creative writing tasks. For example, students may be asked to imagine themselves to be the man in the song and write a composition to tell the reader something about the girl. They may also work in groups to write a conversation between the man and the girl, each telling one another their interests, background, plans for the future and so on. Students may find it easy to choose an appropriate song and construct the matching exercise. Teachers then add more exercises on creative writing to complete the activity.

4. Word portraits

This activity attempts to stimulate students' imagination through construction of a story based on the words given to them. The words are taken from the song chosen by the teacher. The song "I am a rock" is selected for this activity. Students divide themselves into groups to write stories for different stanzas.

Teachers first present isolated words from various stanzas in the song and put them accordingly into boxes. Each box consists of words taken from one stanza. Before asking students to write, teachers explain difficult vocabulary and demonstrate to them how a story can be made up. Here is the sample of the material:

Students then work in groups to develop their own stories, each group writing a story based on the words taken from one stanza. After they have finished, they present their work to other groups. Teachers let students compare what they have written with the story described in the song by handing out the lyrics and playing the song to them. Through such a comparison, students can broaden the vocabulary use in a wider context. This is definitely a simple design task which students can handle fairly easily. All they need to do is to identify a song they like and pick up appropriate words in each stanza for their peers to construct the story. Of course they need to write a short story for demonstration purpose. The story construction task itself is already a creative writing task and so there is no need for teachers to build up more writing tasks in this activity. To complete the task, students have to utilize the four skills: listening and reading to understand the words used in the context of the song; speaking when interacting with other students in the discussion of the story and; writing when constructing the story based on the given words.

Conclusions

The series of activities described above offer a great deal of advantages in promoting the learning of English, the greatest one being to stimulate students' interest and enhance involvement. The authors conducted the activities to a group of Secondary Three students in the form of an enrichment programme run fortnightly each in a one-hour session to boost students' proficiency in English. Students' reaction was that they showed tremendous interest in learning English through songs, particularly those chosen by them. They were very enthusiastic in designing exercises for their peers and felt great pride in chairing their sessions. The authors found that the activities had helped creating plenty of teaching materials through teacher-student collaboration. The materials multiply themselves three or four times after each teacher's session, with each group of students working together to produce their own exercises. Through the designing task, students became experts in their own areas and hence were more familiar with the language items they were learning. The deep processing of language input involved in the creation of new tasks had greatly facilitated the learning process.

The co-operation between teachers and students had enhanced the rapport a great deal. In the joint development of learning tasks, teachers were like the students' friends in the provision of feedback and input in the revision of materials. The interaction among students was also increased as they worked together to do the problem-solving tasks and design learning materials.

The song activities mentioned previously integrate the teaching of the four skills nicely. In each activity, students are required to listen very carefully to the songs in order to complete the tasks set for them, whether it is to fill in gaps or answer comprehension questions. In reading the song, they need to pay specific attention to a particular language aspect according to the demand of the task. For example, in "Split song," students have to comprehend the song very well before they

can do the matching exercise. In "Song reading," students' comprehension has to go beyond the literal level to symbolic meaning to find the hidden message carried by the song. The group work naturally engages students in a great amount of conversation. Finally, because each song provides a meaningful context for writing, students can stimulate their imagination and practice their writing skills through creative writing tasks at the end.

The combination of materials development with the uses of songs can definitely enhance learner involvement. Teachers might find the activities outlined here suitable in a variety of teaching contexts: after school enrichment programme, extracurricular activities, ordinary classroom activities and so on. The design can be a relief for the overworked teacher who usually does not have sufficient preparation time for innovative classroom activities but wants to conduct his/her teaching in an interesting way to help students learn more effectively. The authors think that the activities are able to diversify teaching methodologies and transform passive learners to active participants in the process of learning.

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Figure 1
"Lemon Tree" Questions

1. Who is talking in the song? (The father.)
2. To whom is he talking? (The son.)

3. What is the main subject of the song? (The lemon tree.)
4. According to the father, what's wrong with the lemon tree? (The fruit is impossible to eat.)
5. Describe the girl the son met. (She was so sweet that when she smiled, the stars rose in the sky.)
6. What made the son forget the father's words about the lemon tree? (The music of her laughter.)
7. What did the girl take with her? (She took away the sun.)
8. Why did she leave the son? (She left him for another man.)

Figure 2
General Discussion Questions

1. What does the lemon tree refer to? (love/temptation/woman)
2. What is the attitude of the father toward love? (Never put your faith in love.)
3. How is the father comparing love with the lemon tree? (Love is like a lemon tree, which is very pretty, but the fruit is too sour to eat.)
4. Should the son follow the father's advice? (Yes, this would help him understand more about the nature of love and not be easily cheated.)

Figure 3
Teacher's isolation of words from the first stanza

winter		deep
	street	dark
freshly		December
silent		snow

Figure 4

Teacher's demonstration on the first stanza

It was a cold winter night in December. I went out to the dark, silent street after I had a bad quarrel with my father. The snow never stopped. I was lost in deep thought. The memory of my childhood came back freshly to my mind. Although my father was very poor, he always tried his best to make me happy. I was really an ungrateful child. It was better for me to come back to him and ask for forgiveness.